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AUTHOR Boddy, Francis M.
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ABSTRACT

Three general levels of degrees can be categorized in some general sense: the bachelor's program emphasizes the simple ideas about social systems in the social sciences and the basic ideas about the development of value systems and the appreciation of values in the humanities; master's degrees, at least in the major institutions, are often job-oriented, professionally-oriented types of degrees, such as the Master's in Business Administration. These degrees do not generally lead to a doctorate. Other master's degrees are waystations to the doctorate, or are consolation prizes for those who should not go on for a Ph.D. A master's doesn't mean mastery of the subject, however, which is more the criterion of the Ph.D. Those institutions that offer the master's degree as the highest degree could use it as a means of broadening the understanding of the field rather than duplicating what major institutions tend to do. Economic incentives have been overemphasized not only for baccalaureate education, but also for advanced education, especially at the master's level. Particularly in the humanities and social sciences, the master's degree could be used to help the student appreciate the applicability and relevance of the tools they were taught about as sophomores. (AF)

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THE MASTER'S IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES*

Dr. Francis M. Boddy

Dean
University of Minnesota

*Address presented at the 10th Annual Meeting of the Council of Graduate
Schools in the United States, Miami Beach, Florida, Wednesday, December 2,
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DEAN FRANCIS M. BODDY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The title of the program is "Reassessment of Master's Degrees," and the title of my piece on the program is "The Master's Degree in Social Science and the Humanities." And I guess I can't resist telling you the story that Hans Rosenhⁿaup^t has told us at the graduate deans' session up at Brainard, Minnesota, we put on last summer.

He told the story about the man who had three applicants for secretaries. They were all tremendously competent in their secretarial work, they were all beautiful, had good telephone voices, obviously able to get along well with people. So he was very torn as to what kind of a test he should give them to see whether or not this one or that one should be selected for the job.

He called on one of his friends who advised him to apply the following test: He said, "You call them in and you give them the following little story and on the basis of their answers, you select the one you wish."

The three girls were English, American and French, and they were called in in that order. The man picked up his little card and he said, "I would like to try you out on this little story."

He said, "You are wrecked on a desert island with ten men and yourself. What would you do?"

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The first girl, the English girl said,
"I haven't been introduced to any one of them. I would
dash out to the ocean and swim madly, hoping I could find
some place of refuge."

He called in the American girl and he told
her the same story and she said, "Well, I think I would
select the most attractive and, more importantly, the
most powerful and leadership-type man in the group of
ten and I would put myself under his protection."

He called in the French girl and read the
same story.

She said, "I understand the question, but
what's the problem?"

(Laughter.)

I guess I really am uncertain as to what
is the problem in the discussion of the master's degree,
particularly in the social sciences and the humanities.

I would like to start off with a rather
simple idea which I am sure is wrong, because it is
simple. But it gives me, at least, some sort of feeling
for what the master's degree is supposed to fit in into
the hierarchy of collegiate degrees.

I like to compare the master's degree, in

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a sense, to the other degrees because, again, to introduce a story you always have to say when you are comparing something, you want to compare to what.

The story goes that a man was walking down the street and a man says, "How's your wife?" and he said, "Compared with what?"

(Laughter.)

I am really quite attracted to an idea I have had for some years, and I am sure it is full of fallacies, and the exceptions, I am sure, are more general than the rule. But I have a feeling myself that I can categorize the three levels of degrees in some general sense.

The bachelor's degree is essentially what the American system uses for what we might call general education. And specifically in the fields of social science and humanities, I suppose we would call it the basic understanding of the liberal arts and what it is supposed to do, which is to essentially train people, teach people, introduce people to the main philosophical ideas about society and the way in which values are determined in society. This is what I would call the humanities side of it.

The social side of it essentially has been

largely, I suspect, can be categorized, as being an attempt to explain in some rather simple form, but hopefully useful form, the structure of society; that is, the understanding of social systems. And as an economist, I suppose I would claim both priority in terms of time and perhaps even priority in terms of the extent to which the discipline has extended by saying that the primary purpose, in one aspect of our field at least, is to understand how the economic systems--not just our own system--but the economic systems work.

In other words, it becomes sort of a systems' analysis kind of problem.

At the basic bachelor's program we try to reemphasize very much, I think, the simple ideas about social systems in the social science side and the basic ideas about the development of value systems and the appreciation of values on the humanities side.

Largely, even in the major doctoral institutions such as my own, we place heavy emphasis on this at the undergraduate level. Obviously this varies from field to field.

In chemistry, for example, it is quite clear that people specialize, and specialize rather

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heavily, at a rather early date.

In my own field of economics, for example, most of the major economics departments around the country that I know hope that their students have had something beyond the first principles' course of economics but they are really interested in how much math they have had, rather than how much more economics they have had. In other words, specialization is relatively minor at the undergraduate level. It is still largely just a segment of what might be called general education.

In the master's degree, of course, we are facing a situation in which you name a master's degree or say what it is supposed to produce, and somewhere it is being given.

I was intrigued some years ago when the-- I think it was the Office of Education put out a rather interesting, if not very useful manual on the title of all the various degrees given by various institutions. We were very intrigued to discover--Women's Lib please note--that there is a Mistress of Arts degree, as well as a Master of Arts.

(Laughter.)

But the Master of Arts has become all

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things to all people and when you look at the major institutions such as the ones I am most familiar with, you will find that a large block of the master's degrees are highly professionally practice-oriented. The largest master's program at the University of Minnesota, I think-- I didn't check the figures, but I am reasonably sure it's true--is the Master of Business Administration.

Other master's degrees, on the other hand, of very major size are more over in the general social sciences and humanities side. But there are the very professional degrees such as the Master of Social Work. There is the type of master's degree--although it may go under the title of Master of Arts in history or economics or what not that is really professionally-oriented because in the better colleges of education, when people who have practice in teaching, or people that are going into the practice of teaching wish to go beyond their basic studies in the field, they are quite likely to be encouraged to take not a major or master's degree in education, but a master's degree in the field of their general subject matter, history or whatever or, more generally, social science perhaps.

So there is a very heavy, I think, in the

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major institutions, a very heavy emphasis on what might be called job-oriented, professionally-oriented types of master's degrees which I think is quite appropriate. I think the institutions giving them are the most appropriate institutions to give them and by and large do a very efficient job at them.

But these types of degrees are not viewed, by and large, as being a stepping-stone or an intermediate way station on the way to a Ph.D.

Again, it varies from field to field but by and large I think a large block of our master's degrees in the doctoral institutions at least are of this rather specialized, not quite terminal type, but different than the kind of program that a man going straight through to a Ph.D. would take.

The other type of master's degree is one that quite well can be taken and quite frequently is taken by a man who either starts off with, or changes his mind to, use as an intermediate way station on the way to the Ph.D.

The master's degree at many institutions is not given as a consolation prize in any derogatory sense, but is used I think substantially in the evaluation

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as to whether to recommend to that student that he should go on to the Ph.D.

It is not that this M.A. is worse than other M.A.'s--quite the contrary in the typical situation--but rather that perhaps he has reached something like the ceilings of his at least present ability to take the subject.

The other idea I have about the master's degree is that I don't think it means mastery of the subject.

I was intrigued in Chile when I spent some time down there to discover that the foremen on projects were called maestros, masters, like master plumbers. I think in a very real sense the master's degree ought not to be considered as it originally was, as a mastery of the subject, but as a mastery of the basic elements of the subject.

To me a master's degree implies that the person is familiar with the general areas of the subject, has some competence to follow along on his own--but only some competence to do this in areas in which he has a particular interest; has sufficient mastery of the field to be called a historian or an economist or a chemist or

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whatever; but that he is by no means at the level in which we can essentially certify, saying we can't do any more for him, anything else he is going to have to do to educate himself from now on is on his own. Because this, I think, is the criterion of the Ph.D.

So when you look at this matter of the master's degree and what it can mean, I think we have such a wide variety that I would like to distinguish really between the more professionally practice-oriented types of degrees such as are in education, business administration, social work, journalism--you can name lots of others--and the master's degree in what might be called the liberal arts and social sciences as disciplines of their own, rather than to satisfy some professional standards or competence or practice.

Here it seems to me that the basic principle is that they ought to have sufficient appreciation of the subject so that in good conscience both they and their institution can say this man is at least in some degree an historian, a sociologist, an anthropologist, a Master of Fine Arts, or whatever. But the difference between this and the Ph.D. is that really the Ph.D. ought to be at the sort of stage at which the university says "we can

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do certain functions, we can perform certain functions in bringing you up to the level in your education where the additional education you need can be more efficiently performed outside of this institution, or perhaps by your casual contacts with this institution."

And so I think the master's degree has a place in all institutions, not only the Ph.D.-granting institutions, but all others.

A second contrast I would like to make is the kind of master's degree that I have been talking about, or at least my sort of interpretation of the master's degrees at the major Ph.D. institutions would be master's degrees that may be given by non-Ph.D. institutions for which by and large, not in every field, but by and large the master's degree is the highest degree they offer. Here it seems to me there are some real opportunities for development that are not very well--they may be recognized, but they are not being well taken advantage of.

The large institutions--and the typical major Ph.D.-producing institution tends to be quite large indeed--are fractionated into these little empires we call departments and disciplines, and I think there is

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a great deal to be said for the fact that perhaps we ought to be producing biologists at some level and not particular types of biologists.

I think, in other words, that there is a great deal to be said for the institutions that are not planning immediately at least to move into the Ph.D. level to consider the use of the master's degree as a means of broadening the understanding of the field rather than duplicating what the major institutions tend to do which is to try and bring the person at the master's level into the kind of specialized interest that they wish to push along for at the Ph.D. level.

I am not sure how this sells. We have had conflicting reports within our own institution where some areas which have been at least sympathetic to this idea and have taken some moves--our state college system, at least at the top levels, have recognized fact that there may be a good deal to be said for the more generalized type of master's degrees rather than trying to duplicate what we at the university are doing.

But, again, I think all of these institutions are up against the pressures of using the master's degree as an entry into professional practice and I

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suspect this will continue and perhaps even expand. Because as has been suggested, there perhaps is an imbalance in the American system of what we might call manning tables and to produce a large number of reasonably well-trained--and in some cases very well-trained liberal education, general education graduates from our bachelor's degrees that companies and institutions of various kinds take in and develop into the kind of manpower that they wish. They have, in other words, the good sort of basic education about value systems, understanding of systems, and then they teach them their own special system.

At the master's level, the question really is what are they going to do? It is obvious from the figures that have been quoted already and can be reinforced by looking at any output of master's versus Ph.Ds in the United States that we are always going to have a much larger output of master's than Ph.Ds and that most of these master's indeed will either not go on to Ph.Ds, don't wish to go on to Ph.Ds, or can't go on to Ph.Ds.

What is their entry? And here is the reason, I think, that the master's degree is becoming in

many institutions skewed in the direction of what might be called manning tables, manpower needs, local demands for particular kinds of qualifications.

What worries me is that not enough of these types of institutions are worrying about the person that just wants to know more about something about Latin American history as an intellectual subject without regard to whether or not they are preparing for a particular teaching job or for any other job except perhaps being a housewife.

It seems to me that we have overemphasized-- and this is partly the economists' fault because we like to measure things that we can measure--we have overemphasized the economic incentives, not only for baccalaureate education, but for advanced education. And I think this is particularly true at the master's level.

What worries me more than perhaps anything else about master's degrees is that they are becoming too much oriented toward jobs and not enough oriented toward adding some additional understanding of the fields in which people are interested because they are intellectually interesting and they can in some way or

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other afford to pursue this interest.

So these may be relatively simple ideas, but I would like to defend simple ideas by a story--not the other type of story that I had been telling--but the story of an economist friend of mine who said most of the economic principles that the best economists in the country apply to national or state or local problems or social problems are not the subject matter of our most advanced graduate courses.

Most of the tools we use are taught to sophomores, but they don't believe them. And not until they have been through two or three teachings of these basic principles, basic ideas, basic concepts, at the intermediate level, at the first year graduate level, and sometimes not even until they are brought up to their preliminary level do they really believe that these are working tools.

And so one of the reasons why I think the usefulness of the master's program is that it may indeed not try to teach more and more complicated, esoteric, advanced work in the field, but by amelioration or more understanding and by useful examples and interrelationships with other disciplines they will be convinced that

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there is something basic in the field that they took on for study. I would argue this strongly for the social sciences. I am not so sure, since I am not a humanist in any sense of the word, that I would argue the same way for the humanists, but I think they would agree. I think there is a very real place for the master's degree; I think it can be all sorts of things, but I think there are some rather simple points of this from which you should depart, rather than starting off with just the departure.